

DATE: December 10, 1971

TO : Members of the Faculty, Deans, Department  
Chairmen and Principal University Officers

FROM : Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research  
R. R. Sears, Chairman

SUBJECT: Undergraduate class projects that involve human observation.

In a number of departments, there are undergraduate courses which make use of small projects in which other people are the objects of observation. These projects are part of the teaching methods customary to the disciplines involved. It is the belief of the present Committee that such projects cannot in any proper sense be considered research, since their usual purposes are to provide students with a closer view of social, educational or psychological processes, or an opportunity to practice those methods of observation that are customary to the various disciplines. The types of projects familiar to members of the Committee range all the way from giving a child a test of some cognitive process to the actual practice of working in a community as a participant observer. Since undergraduate class projects would be highly unlikely to lead to any actual research, and are considered to be solely a part of the practicum resources of teaching, the Committee does not presently consider that such projects come under its jurisdiction.

In contrast with the formal research projects of undergraduate honors students, graduate students, or faculty, these class projects are under the supervision entirely of a faculty instructor, and he in turn is responsible to his department faculty.

The Committee does not believe that the Government has a responsibility for monitoring teaching methods in the University. Techniques by which the faculty helps undergraduate students become more aware of the methods of observation in their discipline should be under the control of a professor, whose choices of method are ultimately subject to review by his faculty colleagues.

In any case, the task of monitoring such projects by any university Committee would be insurmountable in magnitude. For example, there are 300 students in Psychology 111, and each does a small project which involves the observation of a child. There are many other courses in which comparable loads would be involved.

This matter is being brought to your attention in order to reduce ambiguity about what should and should not be reported to this Committee.

However, the fact that interaction with other persons in the project situation is not research does not mean that the same guidelines should not obtain for the protection of privacy, people's dignity, and their welfare. The difference lies not in the principles of sound and ethical practice, but in the agency responsible for supervision. In the case of research DHEW requires that the institution take formal responsibility; Stanford has established

the present Committee to serve this purpose. In the case of projects in undergraduate classes, the instructor is normally considered to be responsible.

Since the Committee intends not to take official cognizance of undergraduate projects, it can make no more than an informal suggestion about their handling. If classes are large and teaching assistants are used, it is important that the instructor make very clear to a T.A. just what responsibilities he has, delegated from the faculty member, for supervising both projects. The Committee's experience with research by both graduate and undergraduate students suggests that instructors and T.A.s will find it much to their advantage to be fully familiar in advance with what each student will be doing in his project and to discuss it with the student. Time will be well spent if there is some emphasis in such discussion on matters of courtesy toward the person who is being studied, and on the avoidance of unnecessary invasion of privacy or discomfort if such are at all possible.

Lillian Herndon  
Genetics  
Med Ctr 5337